

Place and Defilement: Signposts Toward a New Theory of Purity in Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion*

Space and Culture

XX(X) 1–14

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

v

DOI: 10.1177/1206331213511722

sac.sagepub.com

Robbie Duschinsky¹ and Donna Marie Brown¹

[AQ1]

Abstract

Following Douglas and Kristeva, Sibley theorizes in *Geographies of Exclusion* that socio-spatial boundaries necessarily activate discourses of purity and impurity. Yet there is also a second, more sophisticated theory present in the text. Sibley offers three qualifications to Douglas and Kristeva, emphasizing the culturally specific nature of purity and impurity classifications, their status as contested and metaphorical discourses, and their irreducibly spatial organization and operation. Furthermore, beyond these qualifications, a close reading of the grain of Sibley's argument suggests an account in which (a) temporal closeness to the origin and (b) spatial homogeneity are the standard against which "purity" is measured. Purity and impurity, then, would not attend any "matter out of place" but operate within particular cultural contexts as assessments of whether a phenomenon or space corresponds, in its relative homogeneity, to its impure origin and essence. This perspective offers support for addressing the materiality of purity and impurity discourses.

Keywords

Sibley, purity, impurity, space, heterogeneity

Introduction

Mackenzie (2004, p. x) observes that we live in "an age scarred by the actions of regimes in pursuit of purity." Yet "purity is an ideal that secures many of our most deeply felt attachments to our sense of self, our relations with others and the ebb and flow of cultural life." Yet, besides the ideas of Douglas and Kristeva, commentators have described the topic as "under theorized" (Campkin, 2007, p. 79), despite the growth of scholarship addressing topics such as waste, genetically modified food, immigration and detention, household materialities, and dirty work. In other articles, we have assessed the work in the social sciences and humanities for material for new paradigm for making sense of purity and impurity discourses (e.g., Duschinsky, 2011, 2012, 2013; Duschinsky & Lampitt, 2012). We are interested here to attend further to the role of space in constituting relations coded as pure or impure.

We begin from the qualification, noted since Thompson (1978, p. 91), that while the idea that "dirt is matter out of place" identifies a significant regularity, more precision is needed since this only sometimes holds. O'Brien (2006, p. 125) has argued that, for "forty years," scholars of dirt, impurity, and waste have been led astray in theorizing these topic by the "formidable sway" that the idea that "dirt is matter out of place" has held "over the sociological

¹ Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Corresponding Author:

Robbie Duschinsky, Northumbria University, Coach Lane Campus East, Newcastle upon Tyne NE77XA, UK.
Email: robert.duschinsky@northumbria.ac.uk

imagination of unclean things.” He suggests that the “thesis does not service the analytical needs of contemporary social inquiry and must be overturned” (p. 143). Likewise, Ellis (2011, p. 890) has advised that we do not “continue to linger in Mary Douglas’ shadow. Douglas’ work is as influential as it is potentially misleading.” Simon (2012) and Zhong and House (2013) have described the topic as having remained rather a theoretical “blind-spot,” despite rising attention to purity and impurity in both social scientific and philosophical research over the past decade.

Yet something about the phrase popularized by Douglas, which links dirt and matter with place, has contained sufficient acuity to crowd out for decades the spread of several possible alternate conceptualizations whose potential contributions we have surveyed elsewhere. Further reflection on purity and impurity needs, we feel, to grapple with the question: What is it about *place*, specifically, that means that “matter” which is “out” of it may well be understood as dirt? This question aligns with concerns raised that in responding to the “cultural turn” in analyzing constructions and classifications of identity and difference, we do not homogenize and reify processes as cultural all-in-the-same-way and thereby lose attention to specifically geographical insights (e.g., Wylie, 2010). The question also echoes a number of other voices in the social sciences (e.g., Cloke, 2005; Gregson & Crang, 2010; Hawkins, 2006; Moore, 2012) in demanding further investigation specifically into the role of place in processes of defilement. Particularly vocal among these voices have been antiracist and materialist geographers, whose empirical research into topics ranging from national belonging to industrial waste have emphasized the significance of the topic (e.g., Edensor, 2010; Gidwani & Reddy, 2011; Gregson, 2012; Hawkins, 2003; Jewitt, 2011; Krupar, 2011).

Though attention to his work has perhaps slackened in recent years, attention to the work of David Sibley is an important resource for addressing the question of the precise relation that links place to purity. The reason for this is that his book, *Geographies of Exclusion*, not only applies ideas from Douglas and Kristeva but also—though this has been little noticed—observes how they break down and become ineffective. *Geographies of Exclusion* has generally been seen by scholars to “provide a striking example of the way Mary Douglas’ work on defilement and pollution can be put to good use” (Freitas, 2008, p. 55), and has therefore also has been criticized for reproducing the flaws with Douglas’ account of the interaction between purity, classification, and place. For instance, Young (2007, p. 141) asserts that “the problem with such theorisation, most eloquently advocated in David Sibley’s book *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995), is that it tends to depict such othering or demonization as a cultural universal” by always situating them as expression of a “need for social groups to maintain boundaries.” Yet the close reading of the grain of Sibley’s argument presented here will identify three key places in which he innovates on Douglas and Kristeva in ways that have been neglected by subsequent scholars. In this way, Sibley’s work will be read as a signpost toward a new social theory of the relationship between place and purity, with implications across the humanities and social sciences.

Dirt as Matter Out of Place

In *Purity and Danger* (1966/2002) and her article on “Pollution” (1968/1975a), Douglas claimed that classifications of purity and impurity are activated by an innate ordering mechanism in the human mind. These categories help preserve the social order of society as a whole, by marking that which is “anomalous” to this order as impure:

Lord Chesterfield defined dirt as matter out of place. This implies only two conditions, a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Thus the idea of dirt implies a structure of idea. For us dirt is a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict or otherwise confuse accepted classifications. (Douglas, 1968/1975, p. 51)

As Fardon (1999, p. 84) has noted, *Purity and Danger* presents “a potentially bewildering richness of both constructive and critical arguments.” However, the dominant argument treats purity and impurity as the result of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. This has been the paradigm most often taken from Douglas’ work, despite the fact that she later explicitly retracted her claim that impurity “spontaneously” attends “matter out of place” and urged younger scholars to investigate further which specifically among the kinds of classifications are associated with purity and impurity (Douglas, 1997, 1998).

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva (1980/1982) explicitly builds on this argument from Douglas’ work by threading it through phenomenological and psychoanalytic concern with the boundary between self and other. Kristeva defines “abjection” as “the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery” (p. 2). She agrees with Douglas that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 4). Kristeva superimposes on Douglas’ argument the proposal that what runs against “order” is impure because of its association with the early, infantile period of human life before the distinction of subjects from objects, self from mother: “defilement is the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body. In that sense, if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 74). While there are other currents to her argument, which we have traced and utilized elsewhere (Duschinsky, 2013) the dominant strand of Kristeva’s account of impurity follows Douglas in presuming that pollution attends that which transgresses classificatory boundaries. In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (1996/2000, p. 21), Kristeva affirms that her elaboration is in full agreement with Douglas’ “first rule” of impurity: “The impure is that which does not respect boundaries.”

Three Innovations

Sibley’s *Geographies of Exclusion* situates itself primarily as an application of these ideas from Douglas and Kristeva, which theorize dirt as matter out of place. For Sibley (1995), these theorists have shown why purity and impurity are to be found in a “remarkably consistent” way in “the construction of geographies of exclusion” (p. 69). The premise is that “the act of drawing the line in the construction of discrete categories interrupts what is naturally continuous. It is by definition an arbitrary act” (p. 35). To occlude this arbitrariness of this act in the construction of ostensibly bounded and integral spaces and selves, a discourse of purity is used to construct the “inner (pure) self,” in contrast to “the outer (defiled) self,” which is projected onto social “others” (p. 27). Hence, purity and impurity are apiece with exclusionary “attitudes towards people and place which are deeply embedded in western societies, although in liberal discourse they are conveyed with greater subtlety” (p. 62). Sibley raises, in particular, the role of purity and impurity in nationalist discourses. Drawing on the idea that dirt is matter out of place, he follows his reading of Douglas and Kristeva to suggest that purity and impurity are used to characterize human beings when “the national boundary may be breached by alien others” (p. 109).

Yet qualifications are made in the text of the idea that “dirt is matter out of place” as a theory of purity and impurity. Arguing against Douglas and Kristeva, who tend to presume a universal desire for categorical divisions, Sibley (1995) contends that “the need to make sense of the world by categorising things on the basis of crisp sets—A, not-A, and so on—is evident in most cultures, although I do not think it is a universal need” (p. 32). Sibley documents several such cultural differences in the degree to which purity and impurity discourses are mobilized. In particular, he notes that “the urge to make separations, between clean and dirty, ordered and disordered, ‘us’ and ‘them’ . . . is reinforced by the culture of consumption in

western societies,” since we are led to believe in “the possibility of achieving a comforting state of purity through consumption” (pp. 8, 63). Sibley thus inserts the dynamics organizing cultural variation as a mediator between socio-spatial structures and classifications of purity and impurity. He states that it is only “for the individual or group socialised into believing that the separation of categories is necessary or desirable” that “liminal zones or spaces of ambiguity” are experienced as “a zone of abjection, one which should be eliminated” (p. 33). Whereas Douglas and Kristeva have been criticized for presuming that purity and impurity classifications will always mirror classificatory structures, such as the boundaries of the body (e.g., Goodnow, 2010; Seidman, 2013), Sibley starts to note that this will be the case when categorical separations have been constructed in particular ways.

A second, related qualification lies in the fact that representations of impurity are not, as in Douglas (1968/1975a, p. 58), a “spontaneous byproduct” of classificatory orders for Sibley. Rather, they are regarded as a discursive construction in the course of situated practices of one set of phenomena as equivalent to another: a material “metaphor” (Sibley, 1995, pp. 18, 53). For example, in 19th-century British portrayals of the poor, “the significance of excrement in this account is that it stands for residual people and residual places” (Sibley, 1995, p. 56). This attention to impurity as material metaphor suggests a much more dynamic account, in which there is no universal division between “in place” and “out of place” but rather the potential for the discursive construction of phenomena as dirty, shitty, and sluttish. Kristeva herself has also implicitly ceded this point. She attempts to qualify Douglas’ general claim that all bodily fluids will be classified as impure since they breach body boundaries by stating more precisely that “excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) *stand for* [italics added] the danger to identity that comes from without” whereas “menstrual blood, on the contrary, *stands for* [italics added] the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual)” (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 71). Ahmed (2005, p. 102) has urged readers to consider this passage from *Powers of Horror* carefully, and to note Kristeva’s precise argument here which is not in line with her other, more structuralist, statements on themes of impurity. Instead, what is implied is that purity and impurity discourses strike a parallel, within a context which renders this parallel intelligible, between the material physicality of a substance and a form of subjectivity or experience. As we have shown elsewhere, this qualification of the anomaly theory suggests an opening to reread Kristeva in a way that circumvents her more structuralist moments, while maintaining the insights she offers into how the materiality of defilement becomes affectively loaded (Duschinsky, 2013).

The third, and certainly the most important, qualification made by Sibley (1995) to the proposal that “dirt is matter out of place” is that “the social and spatial contexts of abjection need considerable elaboration” (p. 11). In discussion with us about this claim, Sibley has explained that “Julia Kristeva did not explore social aspects of abjection much and certainly not spatial problems, except in relation to the body. Mary Douglas . . . did not apply her ideas to everyday life in developed societies or material spaces” (personal communication, 2013). In *Geographies of Exclusion*, Sibley suggests that “dirt is matter out of place” is a necessarily geographical insight. Sibley implies that Douglas’ invocation of spatial imagery in describing classifications as a matter of “in” or “out of *place*” is not coincidental: Purity and impurity classifications have an indelibly spatial element to them, though he does not address why this is precisely. Yet in itself, this is an important point, as it advances beyond Douglas’ concern with symbolic boundaries, and helps us inquire about the precise properties of “place,” which mean that it appears as an obvious representative of categorical settledness and innerness, in contrast to the swirl and externality of dirt.

As a result of these three qualifications, Sibley’s text displays the tensions of his theoretical allegiance to Douglas’ paradigm in the face of a simultaneous recognition of its shortcomings. Figure 3.1 of the text displays a set of Venn diagrams, showing the ambiguous overlap between A and not-A, private and public, child and adult, which Douglas’ paradigm situates as impure;

the Venn diagram itself is Douglas' own preferred method of illustrating her point (see Douglas, 1972/1975b). Yet the caption to this diagram does not identify ambiguity as impure. Rather, Sibley is only able to state cautiously that "danger, or at least uncertainty, lies in marginal states" (Sibley, 1995, p. 33). Sibley reads Douglas as suggesting that "to separate presumes a categorisation of things as pure or defiled," yet acknowledges that even Douglas "herself recognised the limitations of her original thesis" since there are clear cases where "people were not really that concerned about defilement and happily mixed discrepant categories" (Sibley, 1995, p. 37). He thus finds that Douglas' explanatory account is not adequate but does identify an important regularity: "at the social level, as at the individual level, an awareness of group boundaries *can* [italics added] be expressed in the opposition between purity and defilement" (Sibley, 1995, pp. 36-38). However, Sibley (1995) is not satisfied with the degree of precision this formulation is able to achieve; he admits that representations of defilement are only a "reaction to certain kinds of difference" (p. 183), but does not specify the occasions that will lead to such a reaction.

Sibley indicates that Douglas' paradigm presents us with a significant regularity, but not an explanation. This is not, in itself, a new conclusion. In *Hellenism and Christianity*, Bevan (1921) argued that the idea that dirt is

matter in the wrong place plainly does not help us much since if the field of the disagreeable and the noxious extends in one direction beyond that of the polluting, it is equally true that we regard a good deal as dirt, which we could not show to be particularly noxious or painful. The two fields overlap, but they do not coincide. (p. 144)

What is exciting about rereading Sibley's work is that as well as identifying limitations with the paradigm he deploys, the grain of his argument also moves in innovative ways beyond it.

Recalcitrant Heterogeneity

If the explanation of themes of purity and impurity in terms of "order" and "disorder" is recognized as too general, are there other explanatory resources in Sibley's account for addressing the problem? One argument that Sibley (1995) puts forward in chapter 3 is that "Douglas's argument about purification and defilement" only holds in "closed, tightly knit communities . . . in times of crisis, when the identity of the community is threatened" (p. 38). However, he elsewhere dismisses this explanation, and states in the Conclusion that "the desire for a purified identity . . . seems to be unaffected by the cross-currents of culture which are characteristic of recent global change" (p.184).

A second explanatory principle that Sibley (1995) suggests, given his repudiation of Douglas' appeal to a universal human desire for order, is that "homogeneity" is seen to be a "morally superior condition to one where there is mixing because mixing (of social groups and of diverse activities in space) carries the threat of contamination and a challenge to hegemonic values" (p. 39). Discourses of purity and impurity will be "recursively related" to socio-spatial regions, such as the suburb or the home, "where there is internal homogeneity and clear, strong boundaries separate that space from others": The region's assumed qualitative homogeneity makes it available for representation by hegemonic values as pure. In turn, its representation as pure can contribute legitimacy to calls for the eradication of "mixing" or "difference," which represents "the threat of pollution" (Sibley, 1995, pp. 80-81, 92). Sibley (1995) also notes that there are "spaces comprising the home or locality which can be polluted by the presence of non-conforming people, activities or artefacts" (p. 91). Again this term "non-conforming" suggests the presence of recalcitrant heterogeneity, where a particular vision of homogeneity is situated by hegemonic values as both natural and preferred. He gives the example of the countryside as a space traditionally imagined as pure since "pictured as stable, culturally

homogenous, historically unchanging” in which the “the cultural heterogeneity of the countryside . . . has to be denied” (Sibley, 1995, p. 108).

Against the idea that “dirt is matter out of place,” this line of argument in *Geographies of Exclusion* indicates that themes of purity and impurity are contingent discourses, deployed where a distinction between homogeneity and mixing is salient as the measure of the extent to which subjects and spaces have been removed from correspondence with their *essence* through the intrusion of heterogeneity. This is, we believe, no less than an acute re-theorization of purity and impurity discourses. It does not suggest that all purity and impurity discourses are the same. Rather, it suggests that the idea that essence underpins existence (Marcuse, 1936/1968), characteristic of but far from limited to Western cultures, facilitates purity and impurity discourses as a measure of correspondence between the two in terms of the relative disruption of that correspondence by heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements. It must be emphasized, in contrast to Douglas (1966/2002, p. 43) for whom “the difference between pollution behaviour in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail,” the idea of an essence underpinning existence is a culturally and historically variable assumption. This assumption is significant for many areas of discourse—for example, in globalized Western discourses on national identity. In his recently published *Will to Know* lectures, Foucault (1971/2013, pp. 192-193) described the use of purity and impurity to characterize the extent to which reality corresponds to the natural order of things as “the most fundamental thing to be found in the determination of true discourse as it functions in Western societies.” Yet this characterization should not be seen as universal, either within or beyond Western cultures. For example, Hawkins (2003, p. 51) discusses a house without drains in which a garden seat serves as a worm farm for shit, producing “another way of ordering the relation between pure and impure,” which does not defend a home in which impurity is continually undergoing expulsion.

Yet in the dominant form of purity and impurity discourse, Sibley’s discussion of heterogeneity suggests that phenomena, whether spaces and forms of subjectivity, are assessed in terms of two qualities: homogeneity/heterogeneity and closeness/distance from an imputed natural origin. That is to say, “pure” spaces or forms of subjectivity do not contain any heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements; all of their constitutive elements are “the same” in some relevant sense; at the same time, “pure” spaces or forms of subjectivity are understood not to have deviated from their essence, as the ground for their existence. The idea of such an essential ground situates existent phenomena as depending for their existence on a foundational truth and natural state, to which they by degrees correspond or deviate. “Place” and impurity thus stand opposed when—as is often, but not always, the case (Casey, 2001; Massey, 2005)—place is perceived as a stable and homogenous state, the natural baseline against which difference is ever an intrusion or corruption. It is then that “dirt is matter out of place.”

When taken to be a property of “purity,” homogeneity thus is taken to have a more *originary* status than empirical reality in its multiplicity. Homogeneity represents alignment between existence and its essence, between phenomena in the world and their true location within being. And in turn, compared with purity, the presence of heterogeneity must therefore be a spatial *intrusion* on the very correspondence of the phenomenon or form of subjectivity with its essential truth (or the suggestion that the intruder was already there). If a pristinely white piece of paper is (falsely) taken to be the originary state of paper, then any mark on it will be both a spatial and a temporal disturbance (see Warren, 2003[AQ2]). Moreover, when phenomena such as spaces or forms of subjectivity are assessed by the measure of “purity,” a movement in space away from homogeneity is therefore taken to be also a movement in time away from the origin, and vice versa. If the purity of a suburb or a girl or a chemical element is depicted as disturbed by elements foreign to it, this will also imply a departure from an originary, essential state. Claims about heterogeneity can therefore smuggle claims about distance from an original state. Likewise, if the purity of a suburb or a girl or a chemical element is depicted as no longer present, the frame of purity supports the conclusion that the

reason for this is a spatial disturbance of a prior state of integrity. For when constructed through appeals to purity/impurity, social space can be quietly encoded as time, and time as space, since both are positioned as treading *parallel axes* toward or away from purity. We feel that it is this semantic organization of purity and impurity that underpins Sibley's insight that purity and impurity are both key themes for geographers and also necessarily spatial discourses.

This perspective suggests an account of the modalities according to which purification occurs spatially. It has often been noted by geographers that there is an "association of spatial penetration with impurity" (Morley, 1999[AQ3], p. 157), that "very often such geographical distancing goes hand in hand with discourses of filth" (Modan, 2002, p. 479). Yet this association only sometimes holds, and our analysis not only explains when but also why. Not all boundaries between "places" operate in the same way, producing purity and impurity discourses. To take an example, a boundary between two messes has been shown not to generally facilitate purity and impurity discourses but other discursive framings (Jones, 2009; Trotter, 2000). The link between spatial distancing and purity/impurity lies in the way that discourses of purity and impurity interpret correspondence of phenomena with their essence in terms of qualitative homogeneity and heterogeneity. Purity and impurity discourses situate the homogeneity of particular socio-spatial phenomena and forms of subjectivity as ontologically prior to heterogeneity, which must then be a corruption or intrusion. Exclusion comes to be depicted as the eradication or removal of the impure and the defense of the pure when it appears to *uphold homogeneity* and in so doing to maintain the correspondence between a place and its truth. Hence, the eradication or removal of marginal "others" (e.g., homeless individuals), when they are marked as heterogeneous to the true nature of public space, is routinely characterized under the umbrella term of "purification" (Deutsche, 1996).

Material Imagination

In *Purity and Danger* Douglas criticized materialism, arguing that such accounts ignore the classificatory systems that are the fundamental mechanism of purity and impurity classifications. Certainly she is correct to argue against the most reductive materialist explanations of themes of purity and impurity, which would place them as merely distorted recognitions of the real danger or safety of particular phenomena such as food. Yet, Kaika (2005) and Dürr and Jaffe (2010) have specifically suggested that scholars might advance beyond Sibley by attending to the materiality of phenomena, which facilitate their construction as pure or impure. Indeed, as Bernstein (2011, p. 24) has noted, in general the relationship between the material properties of an object and a classification as pure or impure "is flexible—not incidental."

For instance, whereas Marx (1867/2007) argued that the materiality of gold is irrelevant, Schoenberger (2011) has persuasively documented the way that the physical character of pure gold—noncorrosive, heavy but able to be circulated, quite unreactive, scarce, able to be polished to a sheen—has helped support the social use of gold as a material image of value itself. Or to take another example, the pure/impure connotations of milk in contemporary Western societies do not simply reflect and affirm pre-given structural boundaries between the rural and urban, human and animal, male and female, and private and public. Rather, the sensuous materiality of milk as a substance evocative of a homogenous and originary (maternal) essence has been mobilized in different ways, through processes of scientific investigation, commodification, and mobilization in moral discourses. It has also positively contributed to the dynamic discursive, material and affective biopolitics of rural/urban, human/animal, male/female and private/public as naturalized categories (Atkins, 2010; Boyer, 2010). The construction of milk as pure should not be seen as a homeostatic process affirming the status quo of society, but rather as a site of contested discourses regarding an essence

conceived of as qualitatively homogenous and originary. This is illustrated, for instance, by the growth of ruralist counter-discourses in late 20th-century Britain on the healthiness and purity of “raw,” unpasteurized milk as more originary, and as uncontaminated by cleaning technologies (Enticott, 2003).

In the paradigm which emerged with Douglas “dirt as matter out of place” is used to mean that phenomena will be marked as impure when they breach categorical boundaries. Yet the history of the phrase itself suggests highlights the importance of a materiality that a focus exclusively on classification and anomaly risks ignoring. The phrase “dirt is matter out of place” is attributed by Douglas to Lord Chesterton. Chesterton’s mention of the phrase, in 1852 at the Royal Agricultural Society, ran: “I have heard it said that dirt is nothing but a thing in a wrong place. Now, the dirt of our towns precisely corresponds with that definition.” The reason for this, he argues, is that human dirt, while out of place in the city, has special properties for enriching the soil that make it useful as manure in the countryside. He went on to argue that anyone who did not recognize these special material properties was “ignorant” (cited in Ashley 1879, p. 363). In contrast to Douglas’ nonmaterialist focus on classificatory systems and anomalies (see O’Brien, 2006), which animates the dominant narrative of *Geographies of Exclusion*, the strand of Sibley’s work we have excavated suggests a conceptualization of purity as a discursive comparison of phenomena, such as spaces or forms of subjectivity, with their imputed self-identical truth. We feel that this could be compatible with more sophisticated versions of a materialist approach, while retaining a concern for the social construction of reality—in line with Bachelard’s (1942/1983, p. 141) insight that any adequate “psychology of purification is dependent on material imagination” (see also Kirsch, 2012).

To take an example, Sibley (1995, p. 24) notes that “whiteness as a symbol of purity,” as “a marker of the boundary between purified interior spaces—the home, the nation, and so on—and exterior threats posed by dirt, disorderly minorities or immigrants.” Drawing on the perspective we have elaborated here from Sibley’s work, it can be suggested that the materiality of whiteness does not determine by any means, but certainly facilitates purity discourses. We would suggest that its *uniformity* of whiteness can be used to signify qualitative homogeneity, its *emptiness* can be mobilized to signify a transparent correspondence between phenomena or forms of subjectivity and their originary state, and the immediate *visibility of any mark* suggests a fragile vulnerability which makes any deviation already of great magnitude. Through purity and impurity discourses, racial whiteness can be situated as of greater epistemological and moral relevance and value than other or mixed significations of color. Unlike these other forms, whiteness as purity is taken to be in transparent correspondence with the very essence of the world. Indeed, Fanon (1952/1967) and Berthold (2010), inter alia, have documented the way in which the construction of “whiteness” as purity in aesthetic and racial discourses have supported one another, such that each appears as the seemingly natural state from which other forms are a secondary deviation. It is such a semantic operation which helped, as Sibley (1995) notes, images of “the perfection of white Europeans . . . ease the way” for colonialism and genocides (p. 52).

More generally in discourses on racial purity, a variety of socially policed practices are mobilized to construct this identity as the ever-threatened expression of an essence, with this essence conceptualized as qualitatively homogenous and prior to its instantiations. Such practices may include, for instance, category-based endogamy (only reproducing with individuals of the same category as oneself), efforts to represent geographical territories as naturally bounded, and discursive practices which press for the (self-)regulation of young women, constructed as a key site for the biological and cultural reproduction of the next generation of the nation. Identifying such an appeal to homogeneity and origin as the ground of all true existing forms in nationalist discourses, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) have suggested that

From the viewpoint of racism, there is no exterior, there are no people on the outside. There are only people who should be like us and whose crime it is not to be. The dividing line is not between inside and outside but rather is internal to simultaneous signifying chains and successive subjective choices. (p. 197)

Purity and impurity do not organize and police a boundary between normal and abnormal, which is naturally aligned with a division between inside and outside, or “us” and “them”; rather, they judge phenomena on their relative correspondence to their ostensive truth. Sibley (1995, p. 110) gestures toward this when he states that “the myth of cultural homogeneity is needed to sustain the nation state . . . informed by notions of purity and defilement.” Yet the very appearance of such an essence as a natural and neutral foundation for reality can be seen to depend on the ongoing process of materialized judgments of improper divergence and heterogeneity. At the level of social practice, “a race is not defined by its purity but rather by the impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination. Bastard and mixed-blood are the true names of race” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 379). A citizen is racially pure if you believe that he instantiates solely the nation, at the essence of each true member of the national population within the national territory.

The greater acuity of this account, compared to “dirt as matter out of place,” can be illustrated using the case of Trinidadian nationalism. Munasinghe (2002[AQ4]) has examined how a heterogeneous population has meant that

post-colonial states, like Trinidad . . . have been marked as acutely hybrid or impure (a consequence of their colonial history), yet faced with the historical task of establishing and maintaining “purity” in their pursuit of nationhood (an imperative set by modular Europe) . . . so that they too can be considered ‘legitimate nations’ within the international order. (p. 666)

France, England, and Germany could point to a fictional but by degrees plausible autochthony of their population, a timeless history, whiteness as the basis for the national homogeneity that constitutes national identity; by contrast, the population of Trinidad is overly a “racial and cultural mixture” (2002, p. 687). Douglas’ theory of “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” as the conditions for purity and impurity classifications might apply to some degree to those European nationalisms which can present themselves as a set of timeless ordered relations. “Dirt as matter out of place” does work to some degree with the European cases, in predicting that foreigners will be marked as impure as they breach the internal and external boundaries of the nation. Yet Kristeva (2004/2006) has herself observed that not all those who are foreign to the country in which they reside will be considered impure.

Our theory would suggest that purity and impurity are facilitated when discursive actors invoke the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the national population or territory as a measure of its correspondence to what is imputed within globalized Western discourses as its essence, the nation. This is, indeed, the conclusion of Munasinghe regarding nationalist discourses that must contend with the hegemonic European narrative about purity as the measure of national identity. She notes that the assumption that the national identity predicated on “homogeneity can be achieved only with the creation of purity at the expense of impurity is an outcome of particular contingencies informing Western European national formations” (Munasinghe, 2002, p. 675). Munasinghe describes how nation-builders in Trinidad have responded to the hegemonic European nationalism narrative and their own acutely hybrid population with a discourse organized by an intricate dialectic: They have emphasized that their identity as a nation is formed through the distinctive mixture of different preexisting pure races. The product is not impurity, but the mixture of fragmented purities in a distinctive, indeed pure, calibration. The children of “Mother Trinidad and Tobago” are each marked in a homogenous way by a

distinctive heterogeneity of racial origins, a distinctiveness that allows each national subject to stand as a pure instantiation of a nation, as an essence:

The Trinidadian narratives distinguish between two types of purity that are differentially positioned in relation to national identity—the purity of ancestral types that never passed through the cauldron of mixture and the purities that constitute parts of a mixture. The latter type of purity never represents a whole in and of itself; it is the purity that is created through the calibration of mixed instances. In contrast, the purity supposedly embodied by ethnic groups who never mixed, like the East Indians, does constitute wholes, and it is this type of purity that *the* Trinidadian nationalist narrative defines itself against. (Munasinghe 2002, p. 682)

The case of Trinidadian nationalism illustrates our general claim that “a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order” is too static an account to act as a theory of how purity and impurity discourses dynamically intersect and nest within one another. Rather, these discourses are more effectively analyzed as an assessment/construction of relative homogeneity and heterogeneity as a measure of correspondence between phenomena and an imputed essence. Munasinghe shows how Trinidadian nation-building discourse nests within hegemonic Western European assumptions about nations, and documents how the nation-builders have in practice used the particular heterogeneity of the population as a kind of commonality, a homogeneity which allows national subjects to be situated as manifesting a distinctive national essence. Purity and impurity here does not characterize matter out of place; they help organize place into an essence, while appearing merely to describe it.

Conclusion

Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion* applied the ideas of Douglas and Kristeva in thinking about the role of purity and impurity classifications in constructions of space. This paradigm has been described as “highly influential” by Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley, and Fuller (2002), who also note its influence on subsequent research on themes of space, purity and impurity in areas such as bodily impairments, the homeless, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities. Hubbard et al. (2002) argue that thanks in part to Sibley, purity and impurity have been recognized as especially important themes in the context of identity politics, as they are mobilized in the contestation of particular forms of subjectivity as proper and improper, located or dislocated. Yet the paradigm of “dirt as matter out of place” deployed by Sibley has received criticism as flawed, and cultural geography has moved on since *Geographies of Exclusion*, for example, in attending to the materiality of phenomena and forms of subjectivity classified as anomalous within dominant classificatory systems. However, this further work has not to date been translated into new theorizing on why dirt is sometimes matter out of place, and what assumptions about place make this dictum seem vivid and persuasive.

Based on renewed attention to the struggle to apply the anomaly theory staged in Sibley's *Geographies of Exclusion*, we have presented a new theoretical account that analyses purity and impurity discourses as a quite particular form of essentialism. We suggest that it is the presumption that pure phenomena *do not diverge from their (purported) essence in time or space* that facilitates the mobilization of purity and impurity discourses in spatial exclusion. Against the dominant narrative presented by Sibley, purity and impurity are not inevitably aligned with a division between inside and outside, or us and them. Instead, an undercurrent in his text, elaborated into a theory here, suggests that discourses of purity and impurity are best understood as assessments of phenomena and forms of subjectivity on their relative correspondence to their ostensive “essence.” If observed closely, however, the appearance of such an essence as a natural and neutral foundation for reality can be seen to depend on an ongoing, situated process of socio-spatial construction. Discourses of purity and impurity

assess two factors taken to be equivalent: temporal closeness to the origin and spatial homogeneity. These factors are taken as measures of the correspondence between particular bits of reality and their essential truth and foundational state. The measurement of alignment or deviation between subjects and spaces and their imputed essence will differ depending on epistemological conditions; we do not intend to suggest that phenomena which are assessed with respect to their purity simply do not exist or are “mere” social constructions, and we follow Hacking’s (1999) qualifications regarding the different degrees and forms of social construction. The Zinc in front of you is pure if it is completely composed of Zinc, as one of the basic Mendeleevian elements (Zn). The girl in front of you is sexually pure if you believe that her body, her experiences, and her desires do not deviate from a state of natural innocence. A more tendentious social construction is required to assess the purity of the girl than the purity of the Zinc (Duschinsky & Lampitt, 2012).

It has further been argued that, where essence is taken to be the substratum of existence, purity/impurity discourses map a distinction between homogeneity and heterogeneity onto a distinction between primary and secondary. Difference from the origin is identified with the intrusion of heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements into a pristine and prior essence—or as the recognition of such elements which must have been in the phenomena that had been taken to be pure all along. Within such a frame, difference from the perceived origin is identified with the intrusion of heterogeneous elements into a pristine and prior essence—or as the recognition of such elements which must have been in the phenomena that had been taken to be pure all along. In this way, judgments that establish what is to be seen as dirty, corrupt or polluted may be used to construct and naturalize an imputed originary essence, and vice versa. Purity and impurity, then, can be deployed such that an apparent assessment of a phenomenon in terms of its homogeneity/heterogeneity *performatively* serves to stabilize an imputed “essence” within discourse, as the measure of the truth and worth of particular phenomena, spaces or forms of subjectivity. In this light, purity should not simply be regarded as a quality of things “in place,” but a measure of phenomena or forms of subjectivity against what is thereby taken to be their essence.

Pure processes, things, or people appear to be simple expressions of essence, with no dependence on anything outside of themselves. They are devoid of and prior to complexity and the dynamics that organize social and material inequalities. This makes purity and impurity a discursive, material and affective resource peculiarly adapted to facilitating social consensus, compelling a shared practical demand to protect or attain purity through the deployment of mechanisms of social exclusion and homogenization. That purity suggests that a phenomenon relies on no more than its own essence for its presence in existence means that purity and impurity discourses are well adapted to eliding the processes that produce places, people, and things. Where purity and impurity discourses serve as a strategic construction of phenomena as in a state of relative fidelity or infidelity, integrity or perversion, with respect to their essence, impure phenomena are those that have been morally and epistemologically devalued and demeaned by their indebtedness to elements besides their own purported essence. Interventions made in the name of purity are able to mould the phenomenon in question, even cutting away elements, in the name of its “own” essence since an imputed ideal serves to separate the real from the nonreal, the socially, morally or aesthetically valuable from the valueless. For example, as Opel (1999) and Berthold (2010) have shown in the case of bottled water, the construction of water itself as natural and pure occludes its extraction from the ground by industrial machines, its commodification as the property of a particular firm, and the global organization and exploitation of labor and resources that goes into bottling, marketing, and selling the item. Though representations of purity appear to signify that a phenomena or form of subjectivity stands prior to market forces, they are themselves precisely the result of the ongoing and artful process of commercial discursive, material, and affective construction. The images used to advertise Volvic or Evian of high, inaccessible mountains stages a quality for

the water being purchased as coming directly from a particular kind of “place”: *prior to* and *untainted by* all the human processes which are in fact the very condition of possibility of the bottle of water.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. [\[AQ5\]](#)

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2005). The skin of the community. In T. Chanter & E. P. Ziarek (Eds.), *Revolt, affect, collectivity* (pp. 95-112). New York, NY: State University of New York.
- Ashley, A. (1879). *The life and correspondence of Henry John Temple* (Vol. 1). London, England: Bentley.
- Atkins, P. (2010). *Liquid materialities: A history of milk, science and the law*. London, England: Ashgate.
- Bachelard, G. (1983). *Water and dreams: An essay on the imagination of matter* (E. R. Farrell, Trans.). Dallas, TX: Pegasus Foundation. (Original work published 1942)
- Barthes, R. (2009). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1957) [\[AQ6\]](#)
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York: New York University Press.
- Berthold, D. (2010). Tidy whiteness: A genealogy of race, purity, and hygiene. *Ethics & the Environment*, 15(1), 1-26.
- Boyer, K. (2010). Of care and commodities: Breast milk and the new politics of mobile biosubstances. *Progress in Human Geography*, 34, 5-20.
- Campkin, B. (2007). Degradation and regeneration. In B. Campkin & R. Cox (Eds.), *Dirt: New geographies of cleanliness and contamination* (pp. 68-79). New York, NY: IB Tauris.
- Casey, E. (2001). On habitus and place: Responding to my critics. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91, 716-723.
- Cloke, P. (2005). Rurality and racialized others: Out of place in the countryside. In P. Cloke, T. Marsden, & P. Mooney (Eds.), *Handbook of rural studies* (pp. 379-388). London, England: Sage.
- Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. [\[AQ7\]](#)
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published 1980)
- Deutsche, R. (1996). *Evictions: Art and spatial politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Douglas, M. (1975a). Pollution. In *Implicit meanings* (pp. 45-59). London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1968)
- Douglas, M. (1975b). Self-evidence. In *Implicit meanings* (pp. 276-318), London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1972)
- Douglas, M. (1997, October). *Purity and danger: Leviticus, a retrospective*. Seminar at Clare College, Cambridge.
- Douglas, M. (1998). *Leviticus as literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and danger*. London, England: Routledge. (Original work published 1966)
- Duschinsky, R. (2011). Ideal and unsullied: Purity, subjectivity and social power. *Subjectivity*, 4, 147-167.
- Duschinsky, R. (2012). Pure and impure in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. *Telos*, 160, 139-164.
- Duschinsky, R. (2013). Abjection and self-identity. *Sociological Review*, 61, 709-727.
- Duschinsky, R., & Lampitt, S. (2012). Managing the tensions of essentialism. *Sociology*, 46, 1194-1207.
- Dürr, E., & Jaffe, R. (2010). *Urban pollution: Cultural meanings, social practices*. Oxford, England: Berghahn Books.

- Edensor, T. (2010). *Geographies of rhythm: Nature, place, mobilities and bodies*, London, England: Ashgate.
- Ellis, T. (2011). Disgusting bodies: Disgusting religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 79, 879-927.
- Enticott, G. (2003). Lay immunology, local foods and rural identity: Defending unpasteurised milk in England. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 43, 257-270.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks* (C. L. Markmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
- Fardon, R. (1999). *Mary Douglas: An intellectual biography*. London, England: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2013). *Lectures on the will to know* (D. Defert, Ed., & G. Burchell, Trans.). London, England: Palgrave. (Original work published 1971)
- Freitas, E. (2008). *Taboos in advertising*. Amsterdam, Netherland: John Benjamins.
- Gidwani, V., & Reddy, R. N. (2011). The afterlives of "waste": Notes from India for a minor history of capitalist surplus. *Antipode*, 43, 1625-1658.
- Goodnow, K. J. (2010). *Kristeva in focus*. Oxford, England: Berghahn Books.
- Gregson, N. (2012). Projected futures: The political matter of UK higher activity radioactive waste. *Environment and Planning A*, 44, 2006-2022.
- Gregson, N., & Crang, M. (2010). Materiality and waste: Inorganic vitality in a networked world. *Environment and Planning A*, 42, 1026-1032.
- Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Hawkins, G. (2003). Down the drain: Shit and the politics of disturbance. In G. Hawkins & S. Muecke (Eds.), *Culture and waste: The creation and destruction of value* (pp. 39-52). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hawkins, G. (2006). *The ethics of waste: How we relate to rubbish*. Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hubbard, P., Kitchin, R., Bartley, B., & Fuller, D. (2002). *Thinking geographically*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Jewitt, S. (2011). Geographies of shit: Spatial and temporal variations in attitudes towards human waste. *Progress in Human Geography*, 35, 608-626.
- Jones, R. (2009). Categories, borders, and boundaries. *Progress in Human Geography*, 33, 174-189.
- Kaika, M. (2005). *City of flows: Modernity, nature and the city*. London, England: Routledge.
- Kirsch, S. (2012). Cultural geography I: Materialist turns. *Progress in Human Geography*, 37, 433-441.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York, NY: University of Columbia Press. (Original work published 1980)
- Kristeva, J. (2000). *The sense and non-sense of revolt* (J. Herman, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1996)
- Kristeva, J. (2006). *Murder in Byzantium* (C. J. Delogu, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 2004)
- Krupar, S. (2011). Alien still life: Distilling the toxic logics of the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. *Environment and Planning D*, 29, 268-290.
- Mackenzie, I. (2004). *The idea of pure critique*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Marcuse, H. (1968). The concept of essence. In *Negations: Essays in critical theory* (pp. 31-64). London, England: Penguin. (Original work published 1936)
- Marx, K. (2007). *Capital: A critique of political economy*. New York, NY: Cosimo. (Original work published 1867)
- Massey, D. (2005). *For space*. London, England: Sage.
- Modan, G. (2002). "Public toilets for a diverse neighborhood": Spatial purification practices in community development discourse. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 6, 487-513.
- Moore, S. A. (2012). Garbage matters: Concepts in new geographies of waste. *Progress in Human Geography*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0309132512437077
- O'Brien, M. (2006). *A crisis of waste?* London, England: Routledge.
- Opel, A. (1999). Constructing purity: Bottled water and the commodification of nature. *Journal of American Culture*, 24(4), 67-76.
- Schoenberger, E. (2011). Why is gold valuable? Nature, social power and the value of things. *Cultural Geographies*, 18(1), 3-24.

- Sibley, D. (1995). *Geographies of exclusion*. London, England: Routledge.
- Seidman, S. (2013). Defilement and disgust: Theorizing the other. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 1, 3-25.
- Simon, U. (2012). Why purity? In P. Rösch & U. Simon (Eds.), *How purity is made* (pp. 1-38). Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Thompson, M. (1978). *Rubbish theory: The creation and destruction of value*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Trotter, D. (2000). *Cooking with mud: The idea of mess in nineteenth-century art and fiction*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Valeri, V. (1999). *The forest of taboos: Morality, hunting and identity among the Huaulu of the Moluccas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. [AQ8]
- Wylie, J. (2010). Cultural geographies of the future, or looking rosy and feeling blue. *Cultural Geographies*, 17, 211-217.
- Young, J. (2007). *The vertigo of late modernity*. London, England: Sage.
- Zhong, C.-B., & House, J. (2013). Dirt, pollution, and purity: A metaphorical perspective on morality. In M. J. Landau, M. Robinson, & B. Meier (Eds.), *Metaphorical thought in social life*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Author Biographies

Robbie Duschinsky is a senior lecturer in social science for social work at Northumbria University. He is involved in research on young people, psychology, and social policy and has published in a variety of journals including the *Journal of Social Policy* and *Sociology*. With Leon A. Rocha, he co-edited *Foucault, the Family & Politics* (2012, Palgrave).

Donna-Marie Brown is a senior lecturer in youth studies at Northumbria University. She is engaged in research on visual impairment, urban space and architecture, and geographies of youth justice. She has published in journals including *Urban Studies* and *Crime Prevention & Community Safety*.